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As Water Agencies Cast Votes, Future of Delta Tunnels Remains

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Unclear

Urban and agricultural water districts have begun to take sides on whether they'll fund the \$17 billion Delta tunnels project, and it's looking like economic concerns and not just environmental impacts could hamper it.

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The California Aqueduct is the state's largest and longest water transport system, stretching from Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to Southern California. Citizens of the Planet/Education Images/UIG via Getty Images

ON OCT. 10, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California voted to endorse the Delta tunnels, the \$17 billion project that aims to

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reboot California’s main water supply system. Two days later, the Kern County Water Agency offered its own bid – albeit it a hesitant one – of support.

However, even with backing from the nation’s largest municipal water supplier and a major agricultural district, some water policy experts and analysts believe the massive project, dubbed California WaterFix, may still buckle under its own weight.

“If Met had voted no, that would have killed the project,” said Doug Obegi, a water law attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council. “But still, a yes vote doesn’t resolve any of the problems behind WaterFix.”

The project hit a stumbling block in early October, when the state auditor, Elaine Howell, released a report that questioned the feasibility – and even the legality of some components – of the project, for which the planning phase alone has already cost more than \$280 million. The 91-page report found that the California Department of Water Resources, the agency handling the project, “has not completed either an economic or a financial analysis to demonstrate the financial viability of WaterFix.”

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The auditor’s report came shortly after Westlands Water District, in the powerful San Joaquin Valley agricultural region, ducked out of the deal as its board of directors decided WaterFix would not be worth paying for. It also came in the wake of a report from the Interior Department revealing that the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation had quietly billed the country’s taxpayers for \$50 million in planning costs. For years, it has been understood that participating water agencies, not taxpayers, will fund the project. Westlands, which ostensibly should have paid most of the sum in question, has not indicated it will reimburse the public.



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Morning traffic moves alongside a canal with the Sierra Nevada foothills in the distance near Bakersfield, California, in May 2008. Kern County Water Agency voted in support of the Delta tunnels project. (Photo by David McNew/Getty Images)

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The Kern County Water Agency's vote on Oct. 12 comes off as a halfhearted endorsement of the tunnels. By voting its approval, the agency's board gave "[A]uthorization to send a Letter of Interest in California WaterFix," according to the agency's online meeting agenda.

Lisa Lien-Mager, a spokeswoman for the California Natural Resources Agency, said the intention of each water district vote isn't to bind participants into offering financial support but to gauge potential interest.

"Once the local public water agencies have determined their level of participation in the project, the state will consider how best to move forward with a project that meets that level of the interest," she said.

The 40ft-wide, 35-mile-long twin tunnels would change the point of diversion for the water that is drawn from the Sacramento-San Joaquin river system by removing it from the Sacramento River upstream of the Delta. This would reduce, though not eliminate, reliance on the powerful pumps near Tracy that currently draw water from the estuary and, in doing so, suck millions of salmon and smelt to their deaths most years. When this happens, environmental laws kick in

that reduce the amount of water that can be drawn from the Delta. State officials have promised that the tunnels would improve conditions for the Delta's fish species – including Chinook salmon – while increasing the consistency of deliveries to farms and cities in central and southern California. In theory, everybody wins.

But many environmentalists have long doubted that any substantial environmental benefits will come from the project. This is largely since the tunnels will be built at such a size that it would be physically possible to divert most or all of the Sacramento River – something that has Central Valley salmon advocates on guard.

Now, it is beginning to appear that financial woes threaten the project at least as seriously as its potential environmental impacts. Jeffrey Michael, a professor of public policy at the University of the Pacific, says he was not surprised by the auditor's report.

“There's never been a viable financial plan for the tunnels,” he said. “It's been known for some time that the project is much too costly for agriculture.”

John McManus, executive director of the Golden

Gate Salmon Association, also thinks the project is too large to be carried forward, especially without the financial muscle of Westlands, which had been expected to pay about one-sixth, or \$3 billion, of the project's cost.

If WaterFix is built, Metropolitan would be on the hook for \$4 billion and Kern County Water Agency about a billion.

McManus said he expects proponents to begin seriously discussing a downsized version.

“The vote taken by Met today is just another step on a path that could result in a smaller water conveyance proposal eventually surfacing,” McManus said in a statement released immediately after Metropolitan's Oct. 10 vote.

Los Angeles mayor Eric Garcetti similarly suggested recently that the twin tunnels be scaled back to a one-tunnel project, mainly because he thought the larger version would burden local ratepayers with an unfair share of the costs, according to the L.A. Times.

Michael doubts that cutting the size of the project in half by building one tunnel instead of two would cut the costs in half.

“Maybe it would reduce the cost by a third, but you’d get 50 percent less benefit for those who would pay,” he said.

Tom Stokely, the salmon and water policy analyst for the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations, doesn’t think the project will be financially viable in any form. He expects the total cost will explode beyond the projected \$16 billion to \$18 billion range. He notes that the Coastal Aqueduct, which delivers water from the San Joaquin Valley to Santa Barbara, was built in 1991 as an amendment to the State Water Project. While its cost was initially estimated at \$260 million, the final bill came out to \$1.76 billion.

“If that project is any indication of what the costs will be for WaterFix, it’s going to be way more than they’re estimating,” he said.

Lien-Mager said the project could, if necessary, be scaled back. Downsizing WaterFix in this way might require a new environmental review process and could result in a significant delay to a project that Gov. Jerry Brown has been aggressively promoting for the duration of his current term as governor and which he backed decades ago during his first run.

For Stokely, a firm opponent of the project, delaying the project may be the best hope of stopping it.

“If we can just stall it out long enough, then Brown will be out of office before it can begin,” he said. ■

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